Speechwriters Hold Court at Press Club Forum

By Danny McCue

They've written a good portion of the soundtrack of American history, and yet it's only so very rarely — and then in rarefied company — that the wordsmiths behind the presidents of the United States are ever recognized.

On Friday afternoon, at the National Press Club in Washington D.C., a handful of former White House speechwriters, including Theodore (Ted) C. Sorensen (Kennedy), Mary Kate Cary (Bush), Dr. William Ewald (Eisenhower), Anthony Dolan (Reagan) participated in a Speechwriters Roundtable discussion, moderated by Hendrik (Rick) Hertzberg, former speechwriter for President Jimmy Carter and now executive editor of *The New Yorker* magazine.

The event coincided with the joint release by Rhino Records and the Library of Congress of *The Library Of Congress Presents: Historic Presidential Speeches*, a six-CD/cassette collection comprised of the key speeches of every chief executive of the Twentieth Century, from Theodore Roosevelt to Bill Clinton.

Three years in preparation, the collection was produced by the Library of Congress' Samuel Brylawski and Dr. Cooper C. Graham, and spans a broad gamut from inaugural addresses that forecast principles to farewell recaps of accomplishments and sundry policy speeches in between.

With a nod toward that diversity, the Press Club forum was designed to celebrate the art, craft, and politics of writing and delivering presidential speeches and to recognize those who helped craft them.

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> **-Hendrik Hertzberg**

Sitting among the journalists in the audience were a host of other White House speechwriters, including Myer Feldman (Kennedy), Robert Orben (Ford), Paul Theis (Ford), Christopher Matthews (Carter) and Lisa Muscatine (Clinton).

The "stellar" gathering inspired Mr. Hertzberg to quip — borrowing and paraphrasing a line uttered by JFK — that the event represented the biggest gathering of speechwriting talent in one room since "Peggy Noonan dined alone."

Ms. Noonan, who was not in attendance, is probably the best-known of recent presidential speechwriters and author of *What I Saw at the Revolution*, an account of her tenure in the Reagan White House.

Robert Saudek, who served as Chief of the Division of Motion Pictures, Broadcast and Recorded Sound at the Library of Congress until his recent retirement, praised the boxed-set release — something he had proposed several years ago — as well as the modern communications technology that made it possible.

"We would all like to know what Abraham Lincoln sounded like when giving The Gettysburg Address," he said before the forum began. "One of the great blessings of television is, you can come face to face and voice to voice, if you will, with the prominent men and women of our time.

"We can't go back and recapture the essence of George Washington as a public speaker, but we can do that with FDR, Warren G. Harding and others," he continued. "The closer we can come to history, the more we can understand it."

The earliest of the speeches in the collection, those up to and including Dwight D. Eisenhower, were chosen by the staff of the Library of Congress. The choice of speeches to be included for John F. Kennedy and his successors was made by the presidents themselves, their widows, or their associates.

Of all the modern presidents, only Richard Nixon, who was still alive when the project was undertaken, failed to recommend a speech. His "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam" was selected in accordance with his opinion of it as expressed in his book, *In the Arena*.

Opening the forum, Mr. Hertzberg called recorded presidential speeches "a relic of a life," likening those that have been recorded on disk and through television and radio to "a lock of Jefferson's hair."

He then reflected on the unique and intentionally obscure place speechwriters have in the American story. "Throughout the history of the republic, having a speechwriter is something that's been embarrassing to politicians; after all, if you're not the words you say, then what are you?"

Though their lot has significantly improved — one of the earliest Presidential speechwriters had his salary hidden in the budget of the White House garage — they remain a largely anonymous bunch. Their importance, however, is rarely lost on the presidents they serve.

"When we first came into office, President Bush called us in to tell us how he saw the relationship between speechwriters and the president," Mary Kate Cary said. "First, he said, he did not like the word 'I' to be included in his speeches. He said his mother had brought him up not to say 'I' all the time, and that he felt using the word would be disrespectful to the people who actually do the work on whatever subject he was talking about.

"Secondly, he told us not to write a speech that was a '10.' 'I'll send it back,' he warned us, 'until I get an eight, then I'll deliver it as a six.'"

Mr. Bush also recalled riding in a limousine with President Reagan on the way to a speaking engagement. The then-vice president was amazed and appalled that President Reagan was seeing his speech for the first time only moments before he was to deliver it.

"Don't ever do that to me," Mr. Bush cautioned. "I want my speeches 48 hours in advance."

Finally, when it was the speechwriters turn to ask questions, they seized upon one of the fundamental elements of presidential speechwriting, asking who President Bush liked to quote.

It's considered a truism that by quoting their predecessors, presidents underscore the stability of the American institution.

"Teddy Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Yogi Berra," Mr. Bush said.

"That made our jobs a lot of fun," Ms. Cary recalled. "You can make up a lot of great Yogi Berra."

Theodore C. Sorenson, special counsel to and speechwriter for President John F. Kennedy, with Hendrik Hertzberg, the moderator of the program held at the National Press Club in Washington on Friday. **All photos by Danny McCue**

Mary Kate Cary, speechwriter for President George Bush.

Hendrik Hertzberg, speechwriter for President Jimmy Carter. He is now executive editor of the New Yorker magazine.

President Bush's choice of Eisenhower is interesting in light of the fact that they had very similar guidelines for their speechwriters. Both, as Dr. Ewald revealed, had that aforementioned disdain for the"I" word.

"President Eisenhower always said, 'I don't like the vertical pronoun,'" his one-time speechwriter explained.

President Eisenhower also loathed speeches that he considered "too" good. "What he told us was he always wanted to put his speeches through his own meat grinder before he delivered them," Dr. Ewald said, "and he was forever saying, 'I don't use that word,' no matter how perfectly it might express the thought he wanted to get across. 'I don't like it,' he'd say. 'It just doesn't feel right.'"

Unlike the vast majority of presidents, Dr. Ewald said, Eisenhower knew a great deal about speechwriting, because he had written quite a few himself, for General Douglas MacArthur early in his military career.

Based upon that experience, he cautioned his scribes about their being too many cooks in the wordsmiths kitchen.

"I don't see how you write a ——— thing with so many people telling you what to do," the speechwriter recalled the president as saying. "If a speech has any character to it, having a room full of people work it over will just kill it.

"If ever you do write a speech with some character, you bring it right in here [the Oval Office]," he advised. "Don't show it to anybody else."

Though theirs is, without doubt, the highest profile job in the world, truly significant presidential speeches occur on average only about three to four times a year.

Speaking of the "symbolic import" attached to the delivery of President Reagan's "Remarks to Students and Faculty at Moscow State University," which is included in the box set, Mr. Dolan recalled a comment by journalist Roland Evans, who was tickled to watch "the world's premiere anti-communist speaking at good ol' Moscow U. about free enterprise and democracy," offering "his explanation of freedom as a 'primal human force.'"

The speech, Mr. Dolan said, was based upon the president's own lifelong belief that the existence of the Soviet Union was "a sad and bizarre chapter in history."

Mr. Dolan said the president always "viewed the Soviet Union as an entity ready to topple, that it just needed the push of his outspokenness and candor."

Working for Reagan, his speechwriter said, was to come to understand that the president often preferred instinct to expert advice when it came to his speeches.

"We understood that he was always the

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author of his own success, and that he was an individual who thrived on political ideas and political argument," Mr. Dolan said.

"The truth about Ronald Reagan was that he wasn't just a tremendously attractive media property; he was also a cerebral president and a man of ideas."

Mr. Hertzberg said he was surprised with President Carter's choice "to go down in vinyl" with, his 1979 address to the nation on "Energy and National Goals," more famously known as the "Malaise Speech."

"It's a fascinating choice in that it's become a hardy perennial for Republicans on the campaign trail," Mr. Hertzberg explained. "If I had a dollar for every time I heard 'the last thing we need is to go back to Carter and malaise I'd be a very wealthy man.

"What's interesting is that it wasn't the speech that was his undoing, as popular mythology has it, but a staff shake-up a few weeks later," he continued.

"The speech had three parts. The first, written by President Carter himself on a yellow legal pad, after the rest of the speech was completed, focused on his own failings as a leader. There followed the section on what he called the national crisis of confidence. The third and final section was a brisk outline on how to deal with the energy crisis.

"The greatest myth of all about the speech — in which the word malaise never appeared, incidentally — is that with it he blamed the American people for his problems," Mr. Hertzberg said. "One of the lessons to be drawn from it, I believe, is that when you are president and diagnose a problem, you better have a solution to it. In this case, President Carter didn't."

Of all the speechwriters on the dais, Ted Sorensen, who held the dual roles of special advisor and speechwriter during the Kennedy years in the White House, is undeniably the best known.

Having the most access of any of the speechwriters to his president, Mr. Sorensen said he was proud of his contributions to the decision-making process — including the decision to land a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s.

Interestingly, when it comes to discussing speechwriting, he gives President Kennedy much of the credit for his speeches coming off as well as they did. He also touched upon a theme once expounded upon by FDR, who said that presidents must act as "leaders of thought at times when certain historic ideas in the life of the nation must be clarified."

"One reason he was so successful with his speeches is the multitude of skills he had. For instance, he was a great extemporizer. In fact, for one of his most important nationwide addresses — the one during which, for the first time, a president of the United States said that there is no legal or moral basis for discrimination in regard to race or color — he had almost no speechwriter at all.

"That speech was given on the day that Alabama Governor George Wallace stood in a schoolhouse door with an axe handle, preventing black children from entering.

"It was only about two hours before he went on television that he'd said, 'I think we better make that speech tonight. It's time. Immediately thereafter I went into another room and began working on it, and, a few minutes later he came in and asked if it was ready.... he then took what we had and extrapolated in some thoughts that he'd jotted down and that was the speech.

"Another thing about President Kennedy, he was a very good editor. The week before the Democratic convention in 1960, former President Harry Truman had denounced JFK for being, among other things, too young to run for president.

"During the campaign, I had kept a file of people who exhibited leadership at an early age. People who, if they had been denied a position of leadership because of their age, the world would be a far different place. Then I included them in a speech to respond to President Truman.

"I'd included Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Christopher Columbus... and, among some others, Jesus Christ. Senator Kennedy took that name out — and I'm glad he did."

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Anthony Dolan, who crafted speeches for President Ronald Reagan, with Dr. William Ewald, speechwriter for President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Mary Kate Cary.

The Library of Congress box includes President Kennedy's Commencement Address at American University in Washington, a speech during which, Mr. Sorensen said, the president asked the American people to begin to "take a different look at the Soviet Union and what the cold war is all about."

Smiling fondly, Mr. Sorensen said hearing the speech reminded him of something the president himself had once said, in a different but applicable context: "Remember, more than one government will be listening."

There was about the room a general feeling that oratory is waning. "I hate to think of it as dying — we still do get some of it — but there isn't a lot of empirical evidence people like to appear to care about words or delivery; certainly FDR was an important orator, but someone does it today, they're in fear of being embarrassed," Mr. Saudek of the Library of Congress had said.

Asked to comment on President Clinton's oratory, Mr. Dolan said he felt like a French critic being asked his opinion of German opera.

"[With President Clinton] I think we're all terrifically grateful when there's a beginning, a middle and an end," he said. "Mr. Clinton's biggest problem is that somewhere around the middle of whatever speech he's giving, a little genie goes around to the members of the audience and whispers, 'Don't believe this guy.'"

Mr. Sorensen disagreed, calling President Clinton "one of the best communicators we've ever had."

Mr. Hertzberg followed Mr. Sorensen's lead.

"I think the style of the presidency has been changing," he said. "People like Presidents Clinton, Bush and Carter are kind of populist figures. For [President Clinton] to give a Churchillian recitation just wouldn't be believable.

"When Clinton's at his best, it's not a sense of tour de force speechwriting that you come away with, but his ability to reach out and grab you by the throat."

Before the forum came to a close, someone in the audience asked about the inclusion of humor in presidential speeches. Bob Orben, who was in the audience and had been one of President Ford's speechwriters, said, "It's become mandatory for corporate CEOs and presidents to be funny. People seem to trust someone who can make them laugh."

Ms. Cary said the problem with trying to be funny in a speech is that what's funny can also, very often be politically damaging. "With President Bush we often started by trying old jokes with new people's names inserted. Then we'd try to work up jokes around contemporary songs or movies. The funniest stuff invariably wound up on the cutting room floor."

She then recalled one particular instance when a joke was completely lost on the president.

"The president was to appear at the annual Gridiron dinner here in Washington, and the master of ceremonies was going to be Dennis Miller, from *Saturday Night Live*. Well, about a week before, someone had called the White House claiming to be Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani and had gotten all the way to [National Security Advisor] Brent Scowcroft. The incident got a lot of play in the press.

"So we see the perfect opportunity to do a bit at the Gridiron dinner. We have the president come in and say, 'I know you, you're Dennis Miller from *Saturday Night Live*' — like the president had ever stayed up to watch it — 'Well, I was just talking to Dana Carvey [also of *SNL* and famous for doing a George Bush impersonation] about returning Rafsanjani's phone call.'

"But in the bit the president, adopting Carvey's voice 'doing' George Bush, said 'That wouldn't be prudent. No, not at this juncture.'"

"Well, when we got this down on paper, we all thought this was hysterical, but the president didn't get it at all. 'And you think people will think this is funny?' he asked the guy who presented the bit to him.

"So it's explained to him that the joke is, he's imitating a guy who's imitating him," Ms. Cary continued. "Now, bear in mind that this White House staffer is really sweating because he thinks he's just lost his job. Then the president says, 'Do you, personally, think this is funny?'

"As you may know the president did eventually do the bit and it was a big hit, but that's a rare example of a president telling a joke in public that he doesn't understand himself."

Bob Orben, a speechwriter for President Gerald R. Ford, chats with a reporter.